Portfolio Assessment: And the Role of Learner Reflection

By Maricel G. Santos

It is generally recognized that one of the main benefits of portfolio assessment is the promotion of learner reflection (Gottlieb 1995; O'Malley and Valdez Pierce 1996). As part of the portfolio process, students are asked to think about their needs, goals, weaknesses, and strengths in language learning; they are often asked to select their best work and to explain why the work is valuable to them. Learner reflection in a portfolio makes an important contribution to the triangulation of information in the assessment process. This means that the contents of the portfolio are collected from three different sources—the student, the teacher, and a third party (perhaps another teacher, a family member, or a peer). These multiple perspectives on the student's performance contribute to the assessment process (Huerta-Macias 1995). For learners, a primary task in portfolios involves not only selecting work which demonstrates growth and achievement, but providing reflective analysis of their work as well.

In my experiences with portfolio assessment in a Japanese university, I have found that this reflection task—the selection and analysis of work—often puzzles students. They do not readily grasp the procedure and purpose of reflection. Students request help in completing tasks which ask them to form an opinion about their own work and their learning. For some students, the problem is linguistic; their communication skills may not be sophisticated enough to express their reflective thoughts in English. Another problem is meta-cognitive; some students have had few opportunities to develop and express their thoughts about learning. Davidson (1995) observes that the heavy emphasis placed on memorization for multiple-choice entrance exams in Japan denies students the chance to analyze or think deeply about serious topics in the classroom. It is likely then that some students need extra time and guidance with reflection because analyzing and organizing their reflective thoughts for a portfolio is indeed a great challenge.

Without reflection, the portfolio remains merely a "folder of all my papers," as one of my students noted. However, by encouraging students to engage in reflection and to document their thoughts for the portfolio, the portfolio not only becomes more personalized but also provides more information/insight on the learner's performance. The remaining portion of this article describes some ways to approach learner reflection in the classroom and outlines some benefits of portfolio reflection.

In Search of a Definition

When I first introduced the idea of using portfolios to encourage reflection, my students often asked, "What do you want to see in our portfolio when you say reflect?" Their question challenged me to provide a definition for what "may well be a common, yet unarticulated

activity" (Kompf and Bond 1995:9). Early on in the portfolio process, I asked 28 students to give definitions of reflection. Here are some of their responses:

- to read my work carefully
- to seriously think
- to think about my goals
- to see my weak points and strengths
- to remember
- to check out attitude
- to remember the mistakes I made
- to think about what l gained
- to review many things we've learned
- to see inside myself

The students' list is useful in that many of their definitions suggest the proactive nature of the reflective process, that is, the idea that they are doing something while reflecting.

In addition, their responses suggest the many ways students perform reflection with portfolios. There are reviewing processes. The students sift through their past work and note mistakes and areas where there is improvement. The response "to see inside myself" suggests that there are also contemplative processes, where the students spend time thinking about themselves. There are comparing processes. The students compare initial goals and attitudes with final outcomes; they also think of ways to achieve future outcomes by setting new goals. There are also judging processes in which the students identify weaknesses and strengths in their learning.

No doubt there are more processes to include under the umbrella term of reflection, but we can see that the students' initial question "What do you mean by reflect?" is not easily answered. It took us most of the first semester to understand that reflection is the activity by which students develop and express their voice in the portfolio. Their voice, presented either in written form or on taped journals in the portfolio, is the collected set of opinions and feelings generated by the processes mentioned above.

Tapping the Reflective Voice in the Classroom

Reflective activities for the portfolio must be carefully appraised, particularly because the students' understanding of the task is essential to the success of the reflection and to its potential contribution to the portfolio. Below I offer some considerations in designing reflective tasks for the portfolio, although this list could be amended to meet the needs of other classroom situations:

1. Introduce reflective thinking to the students early on in the portfolio process.
Students need to become familiar with the task of thinking about their work and performance. They need to familiarize themselves with the types of analytical questions which they may need to answer in order to organize their portfolio. What work am I most proud of? What are my goals? How are my language goals changing over time? When do I know I've done good work?

What does my portfolio reveal about me and my learning style? These are difficult questions, particularly for students who are not accustomed to forming an opinion about their own learning. At first, it may be advisable to ask the students to answer one or two of these questions on a weekly/biweekly basis in learning journals or in conferences with the instructor. As students become more comfortable with answering these types of questions, they can work towards organizing their thoughts into reflective essays or cover notes which accompany the works in their portfolio.

Build reflective activities into the curriculum.
How much classroom time should be set aside for reflection? Will reflective activities be an extra burden on the regular curriculum schedule? These are difficult issues of portfolio management. It is important that time for reflection not be postponed until the end of the semester when the portfolio deadlines draw near. Building reflective activities into the curriculum helps to familiarize students with learner reflection on an on-going basis. In my class at a Japanese university, the students formed discussion groups (a couple of times a month) on general topics such as characteristics of successful language learners, their learning goals, and the purpose of education. Each time, I provided a scenario or a list of questions to prompt the students' discussion. For example, the students were given an allegory from Plato as a way to elicit their opinions about the definition of achievement in learning. (See Figure 1 below)

The students worked in small groups for about 45 minutes, and then presented their interpretations of Plato's story to the whole class. Later, as a homework assignment, the students wrote reflective essays based on what they had discussed in their groups. The following are samples of students' interpretations. (See Figure 2 below)

Through this activity, students were able to improve their ability to lead group discussions, give class presentations, and write opinion essays. I felt that class time was efficiently spent on portfolio activities because students were still working on language skills while gaining an opportunity to reflect.

The students were very positive about how their reflective essays turned out and included them in their portfolios. One student, Yasue, commented, "The quality of this portfolio is better…because this portfolio includes a lot of my thinking. Especially, I am proud of the reflective essay. The thing l really want to say is that achievement is not only (a result) but also the act or process of achieving….To try hard is one (kind) of achievement."

Students applied their own definitions of achievement when selecting work for their portfolio. A good example comes from this excerpt from another student, Kana:

I have three definitions of achievement….The first definition of achievement is product of my efforts. I believe that if people make every effort to reach the goal, they can achieve it. Second, I also think that achievement comes from the feeling of richness, fullness and satisfaction. If people feel, "I did it!" after finishing their work, I think it's achievement. Third, achievement means overcoming weak points. I'm convinced to become a better learner by getting over (weak points) is achievement….

As for me, I achieved two big goals in (this class). First, I was not ashamed to speak in public anymore. Before doing our project, Quiz Show,...I was so shy that I felt embarrassed about making a remark in public....But I didn't like such a personality and wanted to change it. After the presentation, I felt I did it! Since then, I became confident in myself....This is the example of achievement coming from satisfaction and fullness. The other is an example of getting over my weak points. I was poor at speaking and listening skills before....But I could improve these skills little by little through many group discussions, reading discussions, and other activities. Especially, project work gave me a chance to say my opinion without any hesitation. I'm really glad that I can say what I want to say because it was one of my goals....

For her portfolio, Kana included this essay, in addition to her work from an in-class oral presentation and group discussions when she was a leader. Her commentary on achievement nicely complements her collection of work since it demonstrates that her own personal standards could be used to evaluate her learning. Figure 3 below features other excerpts of students' portfolio reflections which I have found particularly insightful.

3. Realize that the experience of engaging in reflection may be more instructional for the learner than the teacher's explanations.

Most Japanese students are accustomed to the more traditional multiple-choice testing format and, therefore, find the whole experience of portfolios and reflective thinking full of mystery. While I can provide them with guidelines and models, I admit that they will probably not begin to understand or appreciate portfolio reflection until they begin engaging in it. Donald Schön (1987:93) describes a paradox in learning which is applicable to this discussion on reflection in portfolios:

The paradox of learning a really new competence is that a student cannot at first understand what he needs to learn, can learn it only by educating himself, and can educate himself only by beginning to do what he does not yet understand.

On the one hand, Schön provides little comfort to students who are already confused by the new assessment measure. But, at the same time, Schön's observation reminds teachers that getting students to engage in reflection has immediate importance in the learner's portfolio experience. For the reflection task, new roles in the portfolio framework are now made clearer. Teachers must provide opportunities for the learners to reflect on their portfolio work, and the learners must be willing to try out the teacher's activities.

Benefits of Learner Reflection in Portfolios

Brookfield (1995) lists several reasons why critical reflection is important to teachers in their professional practice. I have adapted his reasons here to describe some ways portfolio reflection benefits learners, the teacher, and the curriculum.

1. It helps us take informed actions.

Learner reflection encourages students to examine their efforts and the consequences of their actions. It also helps them to see connections between students' goals and beliefs about their

learning and their actual learning behavior. Students can adjust their goals according to what they want and know they can do. Teachers can also take informed actions based on what they learn about their students from their reflections. They can see how course goals match the learner's individuals goals, and whether adjustments in the curriculum or teaching approach need to be made. They can also see which classroom activities were most valuable to the learners, and thus worth keeping as a part of the curriculum.

2. It helps us avoid pointless blaming.
Without reflection, learners often suffer (quietly) wondering why they are not improving. They may blame themselves, the teacher, the text, or the course activities for their boredom, failure, or lack of progress. Learners may also feel guilty for not trying harder if the consequences of their efforts are not what they had expected. Learner reflection, however, encourages students to identify obstacles in their learning and to quickly begin considering solutions. Based on these reflections, teachers can adjust the curriculum or change the teaching approach to transform the obstacles into achievable goals.

3. It creates a healthy learning environment.
Through learner reflection, students find that self-analysis can be a rewarding experience. In addition, by being asked for their opinions about what takes place in the classroom, students see that their concerns have relevance and that it is okay to critique the classroom activities and teaching style. In reading the students' reflections, teachers also have an opportunity to reflect on their impact on the students. Ultimately, portfolio reflection reminds teachers and students that all voices have relevance in the classroom.

Reflection in portfolios is an essential activity which enables teachers and learners to dispel an assessment myth—that assessment is "something done to students on their work" (Sweet 1995). Learner reflection allows students to contribute their own insights about their learning to the assessment process. It enhances feelings of learner ownership of their work. It increases opportunities for dialogue between teachers and students about curriculum goals and learner progress. These benefits of learner reflection, however, should not be treated as "givens" in portfolio assessment. The benefits come as a result of seriously approaching the reflective task and helping students develop the meta-cognitive and communicative skills to document their reflections. O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) point out that portfolio assessment will require instruction for both teachers and students so that both sides understand their new roles and responsibilities. Their comment is certainly true for the task of learner reflection in portfolio work.

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Figure 1

Student Handout for Reflective Activity

I. Group Work:

Thinking about achievement

Step One (15 minutes).

What does "achievement" mean to you? In your group, brainstorm and write down as many words and phrases as you can.

Step Two (30-35 minutes).

In your group, read this passage and discuss the questions.

Plato, the famous Greek philosopher, tells a story about a chariot with two horses and a driver. One of the horses (symbol of passion) constantly tries to run off the road, while the other horse (symbol of reason) stays on course. The driver (a symbol of willpower) must keep the wild horse under control. Otherwise, the driver, the chariot, and the horses will crash.

1. Draw a picture of what is happening in Plato's story.

2. What do you think Plato's message is?

3. Imagine you are the driver of the chariot. What would you do to prevent yourself from crashing?

4. How do you think Plato would define achievement based on this story? How might Plato's horses help or prevent someone from achieving a goal? Explain.

   Now, choose a member of your group to present your group's ideas to the class.

II. **Writing Assignment:**

The Organization of the Essay

First Paragraph: In your own words, define achievement.

Second Paragraph: Provide more details about your definition of achievement. Here, you may refer to Plato's story or other sources of your choice to help the reader understand your definition.

Third Paragraph: Give examples of achievement from your language learning. Explain with enough detail so that the reader can understand your examples.

Fourth Paragraph: End your essay with a memorable conclusion, that is, a conclusion which reminds the reader of your message about achievement.

The Tone of the Essay

You will decide the tone of your essay. It can be friendly and conversational, or it can be academic and serious. Whatever tone you choose is fine, as long as the content is informative for the reader.

The Length of the Essay

2 pages typed or 4 pages written, double spaced.

Figure 2

Student Reactions to Plato Allegory
Plato says that both reason and passion are important for us to achieve our goals. You need to control both to reach your aims.
If the passion horse is too wild, maybe we should kill it.
We would hang a carrot in front of the face of the passion horse so that it would want to stay on course with the reason horse.
We would make two paths so that even if the passion horse pulls us off the main course, we would still have another way of getting to our goal.
We would make two final goal points so that even if the passion horse goes off the main course, we could still achieve another goal.

We don't care if we crash. If we crash, it's okay. Because crashing is necessary for achievement too.

Figure 3

Samples of Students' Reflective Writing

Mariko: When I reflect on what I've learned in (this course), I find that I've grown up apparently! This "growth" is my achievement....(Last semester) I fell into slump. I was very disappointed at my poor English skill. In those days, I had hated English. And I even thought that I shouldn't have taken this course. The change of my feeling was the day I played a role of group discussion leader. It was very successful discussion....In group discussions I sometimes feel strange that the person who is now speaking English smoothly is really (me), myself?...Now I'm glad.

Keigaku:...My portfolio doesn't symbolize all what I did in this class. I had many discussions with my teacher and my classmates. I couldn't express (all my thoughts), though they belong to the most important part of this program....I want to consider this book as a clue. By using it, I can remember what I did and know what was improved or not.

Mitsutaka: When I created the portfolio, I learned how to arrange papers. My goal of learning is to get the ability to communicate with people in ease. That hasn't change. How are we being graded is a questions that bothered me. What is in (the portfolio) is the most important point, but there are other points. What are these? In my mid-course evaluation, I wrote that Portfolio is not very useful. In my definition, it is very (tiring) thing.

Yasue: This portfolio is all my brain....In this portfolio, I understood the thing very well that we studied in (this class). And I understood which part I understand and which part I don't understand. I realized that grade is not a point but an effort. And at least I think that looking the portfolio makes us know how much effort each person does to make a portfolio.

Setsuko: When I started think about the work achievement, I was really confused. I knew I tried hard on the projects I did, especially the ones I put in this portfolio. But when I think about the word "achievement," I am not sure if I really made any achievements this year....But now I realize that I was only doing the work provide by my instructor. I was not thinking about what my instructor was aiming at or how I can improve my English skills....I was like a person who was walking just because there was a road....I think I was being unwilling to (try) new things. When I first heard about the portfolio, I felt like I was told the real purpose of the portfolio. (It is) the reminder of my goals and dreams....Now I realize that I was mistaken. I would try hard to improve my skills and have a real "achievement" next semester....Maybe I achieved something by realizing that I wasted the precious time (this semester).